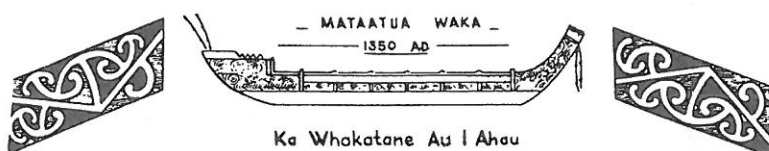


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(1891)

St. Stephen's Church will always be associated in the memory of the inhabitants of Opotiki with the name of its founder, Rev. C. S. Volkner. This clergyman, than whom it would be difficult to find one more amiable and kindly, was originally a Lutheran missionary from Germany, but being dissatisfied with the arrangements of his Society, he joined the Church of England mission about 1850, and after ordination and the removal of Mr C. Davies from Opotiki, was put in charge of this district about 1862, and appears to have been very successful.

The Maoris gave the site of his house, afterwards occupied by our magistrates; Government having compensated his widow for the improvements made. Rev. Volkner also raised the money for building the church, which still stands in the town, which was called Zion, and was known by that name amongst the Maoris for a long time afterwards, they being the ones who contributed most of the money.

But this fair prospect in two or three years was destroyed in the manner related here.

The Maoris from these parts as far as Waiapu had joined the King movement, and when war was raging in the Waikato determined to make a diversion by attacking the loyal ARAWA tribe, and were driven back from Maketu, losing a large number in dead and wounded; amongst others Awanui's father, Te Aporetanga, who was taken and was shot by the widow of an ARAWA chief, Winiata Pekama [Wynyard Beckham], in revenge for the latter's death. A new fanatical superstition had stirred up the native mind and had hurried some of the tribes into most cruel and savage excesses, which culminated in the death of Mr Volkner.

The murder was perpetrated on 2 March, 1865. Early in that year a large number of Hauhaus from Taranaki determined to invade the East Coast to re-kindle the war and put to death some of the missionaries, and directed their march to Opotiki, finding the people there ripe for mischief after their defeat and losses.

This place had been one of the least satisfactory of the Church Missionary Society's stations; it had often been left for years without a resident missionary. The Roman Catholic Church also had a chapel there, and this divided the inhabitants. The removal to Australia of its resident priest, by his Bishop, was attributed to Mr Volkner's representations. There was some mutual distrust and ill-feeling within the tribe.

Mr Volkner was absent when the Hauhaus arrived, and the mass of the population had, for two days, been under the spell of delusion and excitement. Upon his arrival by sea, accompanied by

Rev. T. S. Grace, another missionary, both were seized and made prisoners by direction of the Hauhaus. When the last attempt had been made but in vain to obtain release by a money ransom, they had prayers with their fellow-captives, and read together Psalm x, "Why standest thou afar off, O, Lord?" About one o'clock they had prayer and reading for the last time, the portion read being Psalm xiv, the words of which so exactly described the rampant ungodliness of the natives. Mr Volkner offered up a most earnest prayer.

During the morning, Mr Grace had noticed the calmness of his manner and the beautiful smile that was on his face. He was then led forth alone, none of his fellow-prisoners, not even Mr Grace being permitted to accompany him. They took his coat and waistcoat from him and led him beneath a willow tree. If doubt had previously rested on his mind as to their intentions there could be none now. He then shook hands with his murders, and then said, "I am ready". He was hanged from the willow tree.

A mock trial had been held on Mr Volkner for betraying the Maori cause - horrible barbarities were perpetrated upon his remains. His head was cut off, exposed in the pulpit, and made to appear as if speaking by Maori ventriloquists; it was never recovered. His direct successor after a lapse of 15 years was the Rev. G. Maunsell. War ensued upon the above barbarity. Most of the murderers were captured and hanged in Auckland, but one escaped, the man who put the rope round Mr Volkner's neck. [He was still alive and living in the district in 1891, Ed.,]

A party of the Maoris were horrified at the murder, but were unable to prevent it. The Mission Station, not having a Crown Grant, was confiscated; but the Church site, on the application of Bishop Selwyn, was granted to him for religious, charitable and educational purposes in connection with the Church of England. After having been used by the military (loopholed and greatly damaged), the church was repaired by the Government, and used principally by the English congregation.

The original worshippers therein, allowed to return after peace was made and to settle upon portions of their land, still in sullen perverseness and following the system of the miscreant Te Kooti refused generally to attend any services that might be held therein for their benefit, although open to them. On one occasion only (Good Friday, 1886) when they came into town to meet Mr Ballance, Native Minister, did they attend in any number, when they filled the church.

A clergyman for the English congregation was appointed in December, 1874, the Rev. A. C. Soutar from the Diocese of Nelson. In the following year, Bishop Williams, visited the district. On 25 March, 1876, when preparing to take duty at Petane, near Napier, he was struck with paralysis, fifty years after landing at the Bay of Islands. Thus, on his last visitation, Opotiki received his attention. He wrote: "I lately visited Opotiki, the chief part of which has been confiscated by the Government, and is settled by military settlers."

Mr Volkner's church which was desecrated by the orgies of the Hauhaus and where they carried on his mock trial, and which was occupied as barracks for the soldiers whom the Government placed there, has been put in repair by the Government, and is now for the first time consecrated. At the request of the English inhabitants, it has been named St. Stephen's the Martyr."

In October 1877, Mr Grace came to Opotiki to set up a tombstone over the grave of the martyred Volkner. Large numbers of Maoris, many of whom took part in the murder, and who still keep aloof from Christianity, assembled on the occasion.

After 12½ years' service, Mr Soutar resigned, retired from his charge and was succeeded by Rev. T. J. Wills. A vote was passed at a meeting of the congregation thanking him for his past services and wishing him God-speed.

Mr Wills, after four years' incumbency was moved by the Bishop to Rotorua as locum tenens for Rev. F. Spencer during the latter's absence in England. He showed great zeal in the teetotal cause, and originated that movement here, having induced Mr Glover to visit the place and set the Gospel Temperance Society in operation. We gladly hail as his temporary successor our earnest and active lay-reader, Mr J. D. Russell....

LOCAL CHURCH NEWS,

The hedge along the Church street frontage of St. Stephen's, the plants for which were presented some 12 months ago by Mr Dumerg and planted by some hard-working members of the Vestry, are now making a good show.

The panes of the lower portions of the Church windows have been recently repainted and the result is a marked improvement in the appearance of the interior. Years of wear and tear, accelerated by the fingers of the ubiquitous small boy, had made the old painting conspicuous by its absence from the panes.

- By a Parishioner. (1891)

AN EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNT OF THE MURDER.

An
Account
From Makao
Karaitima of
Opotiki.
As
told by
Henry
E.
Elliot.
of
Opotiki,
1916.

I was living with Rev. Mr Volkner at the old Church of England mission house at Opotiki, called by the Maoris 'Peria', for some considerable time before his death. I first saw Rev. Mr Volkner when he came to Opotiki.... I was a young man and had been married for some time. I was servant to Rev. Mr Volkner at Peria, the old mission house, and made a trip with him and a half-caste named Hetu raka or Henry Apukoniho to Gisborne to see the Bishop. It took us some weeks to go. We went right round the Coast, the only road in those days. We went to see the Bishop and returned the same way. This was some time before the Rev. Mr Volkner's death. Rev. Mr Volkner lived at Opotiki with his wife, and there were at various times on or more European women staying with them there at Peria. Both Peria and the site of the Church of England at Opotiki were given by NGA TAMA hapu of the WHAKATOHEA tribe to the missionaries of the Church.

of England. The present house at Peria was the first house built for Rev. Mr Volkner there. The present church building, however, is not the first. The first church building was a Maori whare.

Rev. Mr Volkner took his wife away to Auckland and returned to Opotiki with Rev. Mr Grace, another missionary. I believe the two came back together. They both went to the mission house at Peria. I was there myself at the time. Almost immediately afterwards Kereopa and his Taranaki followers came into Opotiki. The Opotiki Maoris were very soon mad with excitement. Kereopa's people took Volkner from his house at Peria and took him down to the willow tree near the river bank and hanged him there on the willow tree. Mr Grace escaped with the help of a Maori named Tiwai Painana. I was there and saw all these happenings. They took the body down from the tree and then cut his head off and held it over the smoke of a fire to dry the blood. They then took the body without the head over to the church and threw it down a pit at the back of the church... The Maoris with Kereopa and his Taranaki followers after throwing the body down the pit took the head into Mr Volkner's church, which is now known as St. Stephen's Church, Opotiki. The head was wrapped up in Mr Volkner's own shirt. The eyes were taken out of the head just outside the church before they took it in. The eyes were then placed in a metal vessel with water in it. This metal vessel was then taken into the church. Kereopa stood right close to the east wall of the church, alongside of a small table which was part of the church furniture. The church was crowded to overflowing. The vessel with Mr Volkner's eyes in it were placed on the small table close to Kereopa. Kereopa put his fingers into the metal vessel and took out one of the eyes and swallowed it, and then drank from the vessel again. All the Maoris were of course seated in a similar fashion on the floor. There were some few chairs in the church but the Maoris did not understand sitting in that fashion. Kereopa then said everyone must bite Volkner's neck and one of his followers, not an Opotiki Maori, took the head round amongst all the people, having bared the neck where the head had been severed from the body, and everybody had to bite the neck at that place.

The people in the church were now in such a frenzy of madness that I became frightened and crawled away out of the church, and I do not know what happened there afterwards. I know that Kereopa took the head away with him to Gisborne district soon after this. The head was never taken into the Roman Catholic church at Opotiki at any time. This I know because I was at Opotiki all the time and had such a thing happened I must have heard of it. Any talk of Volkner's head having been taken into the Roman Catholic church at Opotiki is, I say, childish talk and must have been started afterwards by persons who were not present at the time I have mentioned. The Roman Catholic church then was a Maori whare building which stood about where the present Roman Catholic church at Opotiki now stands.

All these things which I have told I know of my own knowledge and from my own memory of those times, and I was present at Opotiki at the times and places that I have mentioned.

I remember the Church of England being built at Opotiki for Mr Volkner. The timber for that church was felled and sawn at Waioeka by NGATIPOROU Maoris. I was there at Waioeka and saw then working. The NGATIPOROU Maoris employed by Mr Volkner understood sawing timber and the Opotiki Maoris did not. Mr Volkner also had one or more Europeans working on the church. The timber for the mission house at Peria came I believe from Auckland.

Memo. The above is a copy of a statement made to me by Makao Karatima, a half-caste residing at Opotiki, and whom I have known for many years. The statement was made to me on the 8th October, 1915. Makao Karatima belongs through his mother to the WHAKATOHEA tribe. I have evidence (in connection with other matters) that his age is at least seventy-two years. He would therefore be, at the time of the murder of Rev. Mr Volkner, about twenty-two years of age.

Opotiki,
13th February, 1916.

HENRY E. ELLIOTT.

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The original tombstone placed over Volkner's grave now stands alongside the outer east wall of the church, and reads:

In affectionate remembrance of the Rev. Carl Sylvius Volkner, C.M. who entered into rest March 2, 1865. "And they loved not their lives unto the death." Rev. xii, II. "These are they which have come out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." Rev. vii, 14.

EDITOR'S NOTE: When New Zealand's premier walker, Mr A.H. (now Sir Arthur) Reed was tramping in the East Cape area he spent an evening as the guest of Mr Kemp, Rukuhanga Station, Cape Runaway. In the course of conversation, Mr Kemp showed him a certified copy of Makao Karatima's statement above, and believing it had not to have been previously published, Sir Arthur included it in his book Farthest East, Afoot in Maoriland Byways (Reeds) pp. 142-145, from which source it has been copied.

Those who wish to further their studies of this tragic happening in the country's history are referred to The New Zealand Wars, by James Cowan (Government Printer), Vol. 2, Chaps 1 & 7, and A Pioneer Missionary Among the Maoris, 1850-1879, by S.J. Brittan, G.E., C.W., and A.V. Grace (G.H. Bennett & Co, Palmerston North), n.d.

Ed., Historical Review.